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# **Electoral Participation in African Democracies: The Impact of Individual and Contextual Factors**

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# **Electoral Participation in African Democracies: The Impact of Individual and Contextual Factors**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the question of how electoral participation at the individual level is affected by various political and sociological factors in new democracies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Relying on a Afrobarometer (Round 5) data, the study examines the determinants of voting for over 12,000 voting aged individuals in eight countries. Findings confirm the importance of individual characteristics such as age, associational networks, discussing politics, party identification, religiosity, trust and satisfaction with democracy in predicting turnout at the individual level. But more importantly, the addition of contextual factors significantly improves the individual level model predicting vote choice in these democracies.

## **Keywords:**

**Electoral participation, Voting, Sub-Saharan Africa, Individual and Contextual factors.**

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## Introduction

In their ground-breaking book, *The American Voter* Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960, p. 3) argue that in the contemporary world the act of voting is comparable to the market as a means of reaching collective decisions from individual choices. They contend that voting provides the modern state with a way of connecting the actions of government with the preferences of the citizenry. It is therefore natural to ask the question why and how people vote, a prominent concern not just for political scientists but for sociologists and psychologists as well. While this question has attracted considerable attention from scholars of older democracies in Western Europe and America, it has yet to receive significant attention in newly emerging democracies (though see Tambe, forthcoming).

Nonetheless, with the transition to democracy to other parts of the world (including Africa) in the 1990s, and with over twenty years of democratic experience and electoral participation, it is reasonable to expect that institutional and behavioural patterns should be consolidating, making this an appropriate time to examine which factors are associated with vote choice in the newer democracies. The focus of this paper is on African. Previous studies of electoral participation in the African context<sup>2</sup> offer a basis on which this paper builds, yet it differs in so far as it excludes countries and elections that are not fully democratic<sup>3</sup>.

Specifically, we re-examine the determinants of an individual's propensity to turnout by looking at micro and macro characteristics, but also seek to take into account the impact of

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview see: Bratton, 1999; Kuenzi, 2006; Kuenzi and Lambright, 2010; Isakson Ann-Sofie, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Our analysis only focus on countries that have experienced the end of authoritarian rule, that have experienced the installation of a democratic regime and finally that are experiencing the consolidation of their democratic regimes.

institutional contexts. The variation in aggregate turnout level by country justifies the inclusion of such contextual variables. A global report of voter turnout by the International

Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance confirmed Africa's average turnout was the lowest (64 percent) of any global region (International IDEA 2002, p.7). However, looking at turnout rates across countries in Africa that have succeeded in consolidating their democracy<sup>4</sup> reveals considerable cross-national variation. For example, turnout rates in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Ghana and Mauritius are higher<sup>5</sup> than Senegal, Benin and Cape Verde, where the actual rates fall below the global average. How can we explain these cross-national differences? Are citizens in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Ghana more trustful, educated or interested in politics, or do particular institutional arrangements in these countries foster a differing individual propensities to engage in electoral politics?

To fully understand the dynamics of electoral politics and cross-national variations in turnout, we cannot overlook the similarities and differences in these countries. Interestingly, their commonalities have to do with their legacy of colonialism; and the fact that most of them are multi-party system in which 2 – 7 parties usually compete with each other in parliamentary or presidential elections. Other than this, they are quite different in a number of respects: rates of human development, levels of economic development; and finally various electoral systems have been adopted by these sub-Saharan Africa countries.

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<sup>4</sup> We equally rely on Freedom House rating to decide which country is considered democratic and which is not. Using Freedom House ratings, my interest is directed on the political rights scale, which focuses on the fairness of elections. We therefore limit our cases just to countries that are classified as 'Free'.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.idea.int/vt/field.cfm?field=221&region=2>

## **Theory**

For many years, the question of why people vote has been of great interest to political scientists. This theoretical and empirical review of the existing literature seeks to capture what has been written about the why and who votes questions of electoral participation. The ‘why vote?’ question seeks to advance an explanation of people’s decision to vote, while the ‘who votes?’ question deals with the characteristics of those who vote and indeed, those who do not vote in elections. Though these questions stand independently from each other, in an analytical sense, in reality they are closely dependent on each other. In reviewing the major theories of electoral participation we can distinguish individual level and contextual factors.

## **Individual Level Factors**

### ***Socio-demographic Resource Model***

Researchers have typically bundled together a number of variables relevant to personal resources which are said to influence people’s decision to vote at the individual level. Beginning with age, empirical findings suggest that political participation increases with the age of an individual. Kleimhenz (1995) theorised that younger people are more likely to abstain from voting as part of a typical life-cycle which predicts that levels of participation tend to rise over an individual life span, as people grow older and experience certain life events. The life-cycle theory suggests that young people have a low engagement with civic life since they either stay in education, are trying to establish a career for themselves after completing education or because of higher mobility which impedes participation (Strate et al. 1989, p.443; Jankowski and Strate 1995, p.91). With respect to sub-Saharan Africa, an individual country study of

Zambia has revealed a positive and significant relationship between age and voting (Bratton, 1999, p.565). Based on this, we therefore hypothesise that older people are most likely to participate, while the youngest will participate less. Turning to gender, evidence shows men generally participate more than women (Inglehart and Norris 2003). With respect to the developing countries, empirical evidence has confirmed this (Bratton, 1999; Krishna, 2002). We would therefore hypothesise that the propensity for men to participate is greater than that of women. Finally, the last group of resource variables, socio-economic status (SES) consists of an individual's educational level and income. From a theoretical perspective, a high level of SES is considered to lead to a higher propensity to be involved in electoral politics. This is because people with higher levels of education and income are believed not just to possess more time, but also to have the capacity to understand and comprehend the daily political debates and discussion. Various scholars (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980) have demonstrated that the socio-economic status of an individual is positively associated with electoral participation. However, it is not uncommon to find high rates of poverty and low levels of education across many African countries which may impede on people's ability to participate. Nevertheless, the general expectation is still that a higher level of education and income will be positively associated with a higher propensity to vote.

### ***Mobilisation Model***

This model stipulates that the only way to explain political participation is to move beyond the world of individuals to include family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, politicians, parties, activists and interest groups (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, p. 23). The central logic here is that these social networks exert pressures on people to behave as members of a group rather

than as isolated individuals. In making people behave as groups rather as individuals, not only are these social networks able to mount pressure on their members that enable them to comply, but these networks have the potential to reduce the cost of political participation by providing group members with political information and resources that are necessary for electoral participation. In other studies, Uhlaner (1989) found that group identification can make it more rational for particular segments of the electorate to show up at the polls even when the cost-benefit incentive structure clearly predicts that they should not. Similarly, the politicisation that occurs within parties, interest groups, churches and racial organisations can increase the likelihood that an individual will vote (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995). Moreover, empirical evidence from sub-Saharan Africa equally indicates that membership in voluntary organisations has a positive impact on people's propensity to turnout (Kuenzi and Lambright 2010). In line with these studies, we therefore hypothesise that members of a social network or voluntary organisation will participate more than non-members.

The next motivational variable that we focus on is ethnic identity. Wolfinger (1965, p. 896) suggests that ethnic identity represents one of the strongest dimensions of people's perception of themselves and of others and is therefore considered to play a very important role in politics. In many African countries, it is common for people to show strong affinity with a particular ethnic or tribal group. Because of this strong affinity that people share with others, parties may take advantage of this and therefore mobilise individuals who tend to vote as a bloc. We therefore expect people who have strong ethnic attachments to have a higher propensity to vote. Finally, previous studies have demonstrated party identification is an important variable in understanding and explaining political behaviour, especially voting in Western electoral politics (Dalton, 1984 p. 264). According to this view, elections in most democracies are almost always partisan contests, which therefore means that partisan attachments guide citizens through the complexities of politics, providing vital information that is necessary in making an informed electoral decision. Strong partisan identifiers are generally



more involved in electoral politics than non-identifiers. Rooted in this scholarship, we therefore hypothesise a positive association between party identification and an individual's decision to vote.

### ***Psychological Model***

Psychological theories attempting to explain who votes, focus on a number of individual psychological dispositions such as political interest, political efficacy and political and social trust. Beginning with political interest, Van Deth (1990, p. 278) defines interest as the degree to which political activities or politics arouses citizens' curiosity. By this, he is referring to a conative and therefore the action and influence-related component of the attitudinal system and is thus closely linked to political behaviour including people's voting decisions. Political efficacy is described as the perception citizens have of being capable of acting effectively in the political arena. Political efficacy comes in two parts: Internal efficacy generally refers to an individual's competences, skills and resources to deal with politics. On the other hand, external efficacy is defined as an individual's perception that political institutions are responsive to people's attempts to exert political influence (Clarke and Acock, 1989, p. 552).

Similarly, political trust deals with citizen's evaluations of political institutions, political entrepreneurs and the political system as a whole. Miller and Listhaug (1990, p. 358) and Bühlmann and Freitag (2006) suggest that trust in a country's political system reflects one's evaluation of whether or not the political authorities and institutions at the national or local level are performing in accordance with one's normative expectations. Ragsdale and Rusk (1993), Pattie and Johnston (2001) argue that if citizens do not trust the political system, then the likelihood he or she will participate in voting will be lowered. Finally, pertaining to social trust, Cox (2003) and Timpone (1998) find that individuals who have trust in others are more likely to vote, while those who do not are less likely to vote. We therefore hypothesise a positive

association between high levels of political interest, efficacy, political and social trust and the decision to vote in African democracies.

### ***Rational Choice Model***

Downs' (1957) "calculus of voting" model is perhaps the most seminal paradigm for research on voting behaviour. This model emphasises that there is a cost-benefit calculus of voting whereby benefits should outweigh costs in order for a person to turn out to vote.

Unfortunately, the rational choice approach is subject to some well-known criticisms, as Riker and Ordeshook (1968, p. 28) argue that the chances of any individual vote affecting the outcome of an election for nationwide public office are virtually zero. That is, one ballot cannot make any difference. This, therefore, would imply that the calculus of voting in its simplest form does not seem to work. The obvious question to ask is: does this make the model redundant? In order to overcome the criticisms levied on this approach, rational choice theorists have addressed the problem by providing several extensions and amendments (Blais, 2000). We therefore follow in this tradition by proposing an amendment of the rational choice theory such that the perceived benefits of voting may include such things as people's economic outlook (i.e. country and individual economic conditions) and the need to preserve democracy or satisfaction with democracy as critical variables that will influence citizen' voting decisions. Based on this, we therefore hypothesise a positive association between voters' evaluation of democracy, country and individual economic outlooks and their decision to vote.

## **Contextual Level-Factors**

This model sees the decision to vote as a by-product of the political and institutional context in which citizens live (Smets et al., 2013, p. 365). Beginning with electoral system, the literature suggests proportional systems are most likely to have a positive effect on a citizen's decision to vote, compared to the majoritarian or plurality systems. Essentially, proportional systems tend to enhance the likelihood that a single vote might contribute to the election of a winning candidate, so there is a greater incentive to vote. We therefore hypothesise that voters would have a higher propensity to vote under PR system than under plurality or majoritarian systems. Turning to closeness of elections, Blais (2000) posits that among the institutional variables that are said to influence people's voting decision at the individual level, anticipated closeness of outcome has produced the most consistent results and findings. The approach assumes that the more competitive an election appears to be prior to the election day, the more likely people will turn out to vote in such contest. The rationale behind this is that voters vote in such elections believe their vote is more likely to make a difference to an election outcome. It is important to note that if a strong competitive election between parties is able to stimulate voter turnout, this also implies that in a situation where an election outcome perceived as not competitive, such a contest will lead to a high degree of abstention and apathy from voters who believe that their vote has no influence. We therefore expect closeness to be associated with a higher propensity to turnout.

Similarly, concurrent elections is another contextual factor that will foster people's propensity to vote. Cox and Munger (1989) contend that the possibility of many elections taking place at the same time will arouse greater media coverage in at least one of the elections, which invariably triggers the amount of money spent on campaign and as such increase the amount of information and public awareness about the issues at stake in these elections. Additionally, Filer and Kenny (1980) and Carter (1984) suggest concurrent elections tend to

increase people's propensity to vote given that the cost of going to the polling booth is fixed and unrelated to the number of elections in which a voter needs to cast a vote. We therefore expect people would participate more in countries where multiple elections are held concurrently than in countries which they are not. The last of the institutional variables considered in this paper is unicameralism. Jackman (1987, p. 408) shows that turnout is significantly higher in unicameral settings. His argument is founded on grounds that in two chambers, power is usually shared between the two houses and election for the lower house plays a less decisive role in the production of legislature where bicameralism is strong. His conclusion is that turnout will be relatively low where the legislature has little power, especially where the upper house is not (fully) elected. In sum, Jackman argues that the more powerful the body or institution that is being elected the greater the incentive among the citizenry to participate in such elections. Blais (2006) suggests that the same rationale can and should be apply to the division of power between the president and the legislature. This means we are able to pose a particular question: Does one kind of election give rise to greater turnout than the other? In principle, turnout should be higher for the most important election, which in some countries should be the legislative election and in others the presidential (Blais 2000, p. 39). By focusing on elections where the most important figure of the executive is being elected, we therefore expect turnout to be higher for the institution that has more power.

## **Data and Operationalisation**

This study draws on the Afrobarometer (Round 5) survey to predict people's propensity to vote. The Afrobarometer is an independent, non-partisan research project that measures social, political and economic attitudes and behaviour in Africa. The surveys have so far been conducted in 35 African countries and are repeated on a regular cycle. They ask a standard set

of questions, so countries can be systematically compared and trends in public attitudes tracked over time<sup>6</sup>. Although Round 5 data were conducted across 35 countries, relying on Freedom House's concept of "electoral democracy" the analysis here excludes countries and elections that are not considered fully democratic (i.e. not free and partly free); people's motivations for voting or not voting may differ in partial and fully democratic countries. For instance, Blaydes (2011) reports that poorly and less educated Egyptian citizens are twice as likely to vote as the educated or rich because it is cheaper to buy their votes. Thus, we focus on sub-Saharan African countries where democracy has consolidated and vote-buying is not a significant problem. Based on these criteria, our analyses cover eight countries: Botswana, Benin, Ghana, Namibia, Senegal and South Africa, Cape Verde and Mauritius.

The pooled dataset for these countries consists of 12,007 respondents who were interviewed after national elections. The empirical analysis of the African citizen's decision of whether or not vote is conducted by multivariate quantitative analysis. Because the dependent variable is binary (i.e. 1= 'yes I voted', 0= 'no, I did not vote'), the appropriate form of analysis is binary logistic regression, commonly known as logit analysis. Details of dependent and independent variables are set out in Appendix A.

## **Who Participates? Predicting Individual and Contextual Determinants of Electoral Participation**

The empirical investigation of who votes in the democracies of sub-Saharan Africa is structured in the following manner: we begin by first breaking down a citizen's propensity to turnout in elections along the lines of the key theoretical perspectives; by building a series of very basic

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<sup>6</sup> More information on the Afrobarometer survey data can be obtained from their websites: <http://www.afrobarometer.org/>

or parsimonious multivariate logistic regressions that comprises the effects of individual and contextual variables on electoral participation. Nevertheless, a true explanation of what influences people's propensity to vote can only be seen through an expanded logit model that incorporates the impact of both individual and contextual variables into a single model, building it step by step and this would be presented later.

## **The Impact of Individual Factors on Vote Choice**

We report results for each of the different theoretical approaches set out above as discrete models, before running a final model that incorporates all effects simultaneously. We begin by focusing on individual level variables drawn from the resource, mobilisation, psychological and rational choice theories, as presented in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4.

### ***The Effect of Socio- Demographic Resource Factors on Voting***

We start with a simple logit model in which the key resource variables discussed above (age, education, gender and socio-economic status) are entered simultaneously; the results are presented in Table 1.

#### **[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

Among the four socio demographic variables, only age reveals a highly significant overall effect on voting in African electoral democracies. Compared to young people, middle-aged adults and elderly people are significantly more likely to vote. None of the remaining variables (i.e. education, SES and gender), have significant impacts on voting, contrary to what one would expect based on the resource model, although they do at least produce parameters that run in the expected direction. For example, the Exp (B) odd ratios indicate that compared to those with primary education, those with higher education are 12.3 percent more likely to

participate; similarly, compared to those with lower SES (i.e. always gone without food), those with a higher SES are 2.6 percent more likely to vote., while men are 3.4 percent more likely to participate in elections than women.

### ***The Effect of Mobilisational Factors on Electoral Participation***

We examine the impact of five mobilisational variables (i.e. civil society organisation, party identification, religiosity, discussing politics and ethnic identity) in Table 2.

#### **[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

This shows highly significant overall effects of party identification, civil society organisation membership, discussing politics and religiosity on voting ( $p < .0005$ ). Also the B coefficients of all four variables are positive indicating that an increase in the value of any of the variables is associated with an increase in the likelihood of voting, as expected. The odd ratios tell us that compared to voters who are non-party identifiers, those with a party ties are 59.3 percent more likely to vote, while those with civil society organisational memberships are 49.6 percent more likely to vote than those without such memberships. Again, compared to citizens who ‘never discussed politics’, those who discuss politics either ‘occasionally or frequently’ are 43.7 and 63.2 percent more likely to participate in electoral politics, respectively. Compared to voters who are not religious, those who are religious are 49.8 percent more likely to vote. Finally, moving to ethnic identity, there is non-significant relationship between ethnic identity and electoral participation. However, looking at the parameters estimate for the two ethnic categories we see a negative sign for individual with only national identity. In effect, this means that those who have an ethnic identity beyond the national identity are more likely to vote than those with only national identities. Thus, a strong sense of ethnic loyalty can serve as a mobilisational factor.

### ***The Effect of Psychological Variables on Electoral Participation***

Turning our attention to the effects of the psychological variables on voting, Table 3 presents a multivariate regression which takes into account the effects of political efficacy, political interest, political trust and social trust on voting.

**[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

The results confirm highly significant overall effects of political interest and political trust on voting. Thus, citizens who declared themselves to be interested in politics or public affairs are 36.7 percent much more likely to participate than citizens who declared themselves not to be interested in politics, and compared to voters with no trust in political institution, citizens who are more trustful are 30.9 percent more likely to vote. However, social trust does not produce a significant impact voter participation. Finally, it is striking that we find a negative sign and non-significant relationship for political efficacy; the sign suggests that citizens who are more efficacious are less likely to vote than those who lack such efficacy, which runs counter to expectations – although the most important thing about this is the non-significance of the relationship.

### ***The Impact of Rational Choice Factors on Electoral Participation***

Our examination of individual level factors affecting vote choice is completed with a logit model that looks at the impact of the rational choice variables on electoral participation. The results obtained are presented in Table 4.

**[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]**

The following inferences can be drawn from Table 4. First, there is a positive and significant overall effect of satisfaction with democracy on electoral participation. The result is in the



direction predicted by our hypothesis, indicating that those who are satisfied are 2.6 percent more likely to vote than those who are not. Second, turning to the country economic outlook, the relationship between country's economic condition and voting reveals a significant relationship for the dummy country economic condition being better and insignificant for the dummy country economic condition being same. Overall, the parameter estimates for the two categories are both positive indicating compared to those who have a negative evaluation of their country economic condition; those who have a more positive evaluation are more likely to vote. Lastly, moving to an individual's evaluation of their own personal economic condition, we observe evidence of a significant relationship between this and voting in African democracies. However, the B coefficients are negative, which suggests that having a positive (better or same) evaluation of one's economic condition actually reduces the chance of voting compared to those who take a negative view, contrary to expectations.

### **The Impact of Contextual Factors on Vote Choice**

We now turn to the contextual level factors that might impact on people's propensity to turnout: type of political system, concurrent elections, closeness of election and electoral system.

#### **[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]**

Table 5 presents the findings. There are highly significant overall effects for the electoral system, closeness of election, concurrent elections and regime type on vote choice in African democracies. In more detail, the parameter estimates suggest the following: citizens living under proportional electoral systems are 20.8 percent more likely to vote than those living in countries where the electoral systems are not proportional. Voters are 64 percent more likely to participate in countries where the elections are considered to be close than in countries where

elections are not regarded as being a close or competitive. Turning to regime type, compared to citizens living under parliamentary democracies, those living under presidential systems are 41.5 percent more likely to vote. Finally, concurrently elections are significant, but not in the expected direction: voters are more likely to vote where the elections are not held concurrently. However, this result may be misleading given that in our data, only Ghana held presidential and legislative elections concurrently.

### **Incorporating Individual and Contextual Factors to Explain Vote Choice**

Having examined the discrete models, we now model the effects cumulatively. In models I – IV, we estimate a logistic model that comprises only individual level factors building it on a step by step basis. Model V is the complete model that incorporates individual and contextual explanations in a single account of people’s propensity to turnout in African countries. This is especially valuable as it helps us understand how the individual level variables would fare once the contextual level factors are added in.

#### **[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]**

As shown in Table 6, Model I consists of the effect of resource or socio-demographic variables on electoral participation. This demographic model is of course the same as the basic model that was presented in Table 1. To recap briefly, this model shows that only age is positive and significant (in that older people are more likely to vote), while education, socioeconomic status and gender are all non-significant although in a positive direction with vote choice. Remarkably, when this model is run across individual countries we find the impact of age and education on voting to be consistent in all eight countries, with older people and those with a higher level of education revealing a higher propensity to vote compared to young people and those with a lower level of education.

However, with respect to the two remaining socio-demographic variable (i.e. socioeconomic status and gender) we find that in five countries (i.e. South Africa, Namibia, Ghana, Mauritius and Cape Verde) those with a higher SES status tend to vote at higher rates, while for three countries (i.e. Benin, Botswana and Senegal) those with a lower socioeconomic status tend to participate at a higher rate. Finally, regarding gender, individual country results reveal that in three countries men are more likely to participate than women, while in the remaining five countries women are more likely to participate<sup>7</sup>. These inconsistencies in the impact of socio-economic status and gender across African democracies suggest that the relationship between these variables on vote choice are somehow shaped by the context. Effects which may be significant at the level of particular countries get washed out by the process of pooling data across the region as a whole.

In the next model (Model II) we add mobilisation variables into a model that already consists of socio-demographic variables. We observe that all the mobilisational variables - civil society organisation, party identification, discussing politics, and religiosity - are highly significant and in the directions expected by our hypothesis, with the exception of ethnic identity that has an insignificant impact on voting. The odd ratios reveal that voters who declared themselves to be members of civil society organisations are 37.9 percent more likely to vote than those who are not members of civil society organisations, while voters with party ties are 52.8 percent more likely to vote than those with no party ties, those who frequently discuss politics are 60.9 percent more likely to vote than those who never do so, and finally voters who claim to be religious are 44.9 percent likely to vote than those who are not religious. Notwithstanding the apparent finding that ethnicity loses its significance in Model II, running the models separately for individual countries reveals that in at least four countries those with

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<sup>7</sup> The full details of country-level models are not reported here but are available upon request.

national identity only were significantly less likely to vote than those with a further ethnic identity. This indicates that in some African countries a strong sense of ethnic loyalty can therefore indeed serve as a mobilisational factor. Controlling for these mobilisational variables age is the only resource variable that remains unchanged in showing a positive and significant relationship with voting.

In Model III, psychological variables are now entered into the model. Among the four psychological variables that are added (political efficacy, political interest, political trust and social trust), only political trust shows a positive and significant relationship with electoral participation, with those who claim to be politically trusting 21.3 percent more likely to participate than those lacking in political trust. The surprise finding is the significant but negative relationship between political efficacy and electoral participation. Compared to people who are not efficacious, individuals who are more efficacious are less likely to vote. When controlling for these psychological variables, all the mobilisational variables retain their significant and positive relationships with voting (excepting ethnic identity, which remains non-significant). Regarding the socio-demographic variables, nothing changes from Model II: only age has a significant effect on voting, while education, socio-economic status and gender are still non-significant.

Model IV adds the rational choice variables. Of these, only assessments of the national economic condition show a positive and significant relationship with voting, with the odds ratio indicating that citizens who have a positive evaluation are 20.4 percent more likely to participate than those who have a negative evaluation about their country economy. Of these resources factors, only age continues to have a positive and significant impact on voting; as in Models I-III, the effects of education, socio-economic status and gender remain non-significant. Nothing changes in respect of the mobilisational factors, which all retain their significance for voting, except ethnic identity. As for the psychological variables, only political trust maintains

a positive and significant relationship with voting. Political efficacy still shows a significant but negative relationship with voting.

In Model V, we complete the picture by adding the contextual country-level variables. When the contextual variables are added, there is an improvement in the estimates of some of the individual-level factors. Beginning with the resource variables, socioeconomic status and gender are still non-significant, but one of the education categories (higher education) becomes positive and significant, with those with higher education more likely to vote compared to those with a poor or lower level of education. As has been the case throughout, age is the only variable that remain unchanged; its effect on voting is still positive and significant, with young voters being less likely to turn out than older voters. Controlling for the national contextual effects, all of the mobilisational variables (party identification, civil society organisation, religiosity, and discussing politics) are positive and significant; however, ethnic identity is non-significant. Of the psychological variables, political trust is significant and positive. Looking at the rational choice variables, we see that satisfaction with democracy and perception of the national economic condition generally show significant effects on voting. Our data also point to a significant but negative relationship between individual living conditions and voting; the more negatively people perceive their own economic circumstances, the less likely they are to vote.

Finally, considering the contextual and country levels variables that are entered in model V, it is evident that the type of electoral system, closeness of election and the type of political system all show positive and significant impacts on voting. That is, voters who live in democracies where the electoral system is proportional are 61.7 percent much more likely to vote than those who live where the electoral system is non-proportional; citizens who live in presidential systems are 73.4 much more likely to vote than those who live in parliamentary democracies; and finally voters who live in countries where the elections are considered to be close or competitive are twice as likely to vote as those who live in democracies or countries

where elections are not close. The only contextual variable that is negative but significant is the concurrent staging of elections; however, as we have already stated, it is not safe to draw a general inference from this particular finding given that it is effectively derived from just a single case.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to make a contribution to the expanding literature on electoral participation by re-assessing the link between individual and contextual characteristics on turnout at the individual level. Using a combination of Afrobarometer's individual-level survey data and additional variables relating to country-level institutional contexts, we have examined individuals' propensities to engage in electoral politics across eight sub-Saharan African countries. In our analyses of electoral participation in these countries, we proposed a series of factors that are drawn from five major theoretical perspectives on political participation. Having identified the relevant variables from previous research on electoral behaviour in established democracies, we have been able to evaluate the impact of these variables through a series of multivariate logistic regressions. The result obtained thus enable us to draw a number of conclusions.

First, among the socio-demographic variables, only age and education prove to have a positive and significant effect on voting. It was clear that older people (i.e. middle-aged adults and elderly people) and those with higher levels of education tend to participate at higher rates than younger people and those with lower levels of education. Second, the mobilisational variables have a consistently strong impact: civil society organisation, party identification, discussing politics and religiosity all show very positive and significant effects on voting. Although the exact level of significance of these variables varies from one model to another, it is clear that they are all significant for electoral participation. Thus, one of the clear take-home

messages of this analysis is that in general terms the mobilisational variables have a very powerful effect. Third, among the social-psychological factors, political trust has a significant effect on propensity to vote, as does, satisfaction with democracy and having a positive evaluation of the country's economic condition, each of these significantly increasing the chances of turning out to vote. Finally, aspects of a country's institutional context clearly matter as well: specifically, proportional electoral systems, presidential systems, and competitive elections, all tend to inspire citizens to turn out and vote.

The results of this study carry significant implications for future research and for democracy in Africa. On a methodological level, in our final model (i.e. Model V) we observed a significant improvement in the estimate of some individual level factors when the contextual level factors were added, which serves reemphasise the need for research to incorporate both individual-level and contextual variables in theoretical and methodological strategies, when studying political behaviour. Politically, the research points to a number of objectives that it is incumbent upon politicians to pursue effectively. First, it is clear that satisfaction with democracy among the populace in these African countries, as elsewhere, will help to drive up rates of electoral participation. This in turn then helps to further legitimise democracy, creating a virtuous circle. In fact, satisfaction with democracy is of course a reflection of the willingness of the political elites to adhere to democratic standards and, especially, to conduct free and fair elections. This is surely indispensable for the long-run survival of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of institutional design, this study points to the importance of implementing proportional electoral systems, where they do not already exist. Presidential systems are also likely to enjoy greater turnout, all other things being equal. Of course, moves to adopt such structures and practices might require major constitutional reforms in some cases, and will not be lightly adopted. Additionally, although this study did reveal a significant but negative relationship between concurrent elections and voting, we believe this result was very inconclusive given that only one country (i.e. Ghana) held concurrent elections. Further research is clearly needed

on this point, but it would not yet be wise to rule out the possibility countries could combat the financial cost of organising elections by ensuring that both presidential and legislative or local elections are held concurrently.

Finally, the importance of people's perceptions of their country's and indeed their own personal economic circumstances, cannot be overlooked. The fact that voters consider government policies and performances in their voting decision places a huge responsibility on incumbent governments to meet certain economic standards if they desire to be re-elected, and of course this equally challenges opposition parties to build up concrete agendas, ideologies and even policies on how they intend to improve the plight of the masses. Thus questions of economic development, equality and democratic legitimacy are intimately entwined.

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## Appendix A: Operationalisation of the variables

Variable	Survey item
<b>Dependent Variable</b>	
<b>Electoral participation</b>	A dummy equal 1 if the respondent reports voting in the most recent national election, 0 otherwise.
<b>Resource variables</b>	



<b>Age</b>	Recoded into: 0= 18-29 (young people), 1= 29-64 (middle-aged adults) and 2= 65+ (elderly people).
<b>Education</b>	what is your highest level of education you have achieved? Recoded into (0=primary, 1= secondary, and 2= higher education.
<b>Gender</b>	Dummy: 1 for men and 0 for women.
<b>SES</b>	Over the past years, how often, if ever, have you or your family gone without food? (0 – 4) 0 = always gone without food, 4= never gone without food

### Mobilisation variables

<b>Associational networks</b>	Dummy: 1 for union members and 0 for non-members
<b>Party identification</b>	Do you feel close to a political party?" 1 for yes; 0 for no.
<b>Discussing Politics</b>	When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters? 0=Never, 1=Occasionally and 2=Frequently.
<b>Religiosity</b>	Dummy: 1 yes religious and 0 no, not religious
<b>Ethnic Identity</b>	Suppose you had to choose between being a (Ghanaian/Kenyan/etc.) and being a (respondent's identity group); which of these two groups do you feel most strongly attached to? (0=Ethnic identity, 1=National/Ethnic identity equal, 2=national ID).

### Psychological variables

<b>Political efficacy</b>	Politics and government sometimes seem so complicated that you cannot really understand what going on? (0= Strongly agree and Agree, 1= neither agree nor disagree, 2= Disagree, strongly disagree).
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<b>Political interest</b>	How interested would you say you are in public affairs? Not at all interested, not very interested, somewhat interested, and very interested (recoded into 1=interested, 0=not interested).
<b>Political trust</b>	How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president/Prime Minister. Not at all, just a little, somewhat, a lot. (recoded into 1=trust, 0=no trust).
<b>Social trust</b>	Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you must be very careful in dealing with people? Recoded 0= no trust; you must be very careful' 1= trust most people can be trusted.
<b>Rational choice variables</b>	
<b>Satisfaction with democracy</b>	Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country? Not at all satisfied, not very satisfied, fairly satisfied and Very satisfied (recoded into 1= satisfied, 0= not satisfied)
<b>Country economic condition</b>	Looking back, how do you rate the following compared to twelve months ago: economic conditions in this country? much worse, worse, same, better and much better. (recoded into 0=worse, 1= same and 2= better).
<b>Individual economic condition</b>	Looking back, how do you rate the following compared to twelve months ago: your living condition? much worse, worse, same, better and much better. (recoded into 0=worse, 1= same and 2= better).
<b>Contextual level variables</b>	
<b>Electoral system</b>	Dummy: 1= PR system, 0= non-PR system
<b>Concurrent elections</b>	Dummy: 1= presidential/legislative elections held concurrently, 0= non-concurrent elections
<b>Regime type</b>	Dummy: 1= presidential system, 0= non-presidential system/others.
<b>Closeness elections</b>	Margin of victory for the winning candidate over the runner-up in presidential elections, while for parliamentary democracies, we measure closeness of election as the difference in seat shares between the top two parties winning seats. (recoded 1=

	close election, 0= not a close election
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